# WHAT IS POETRY?

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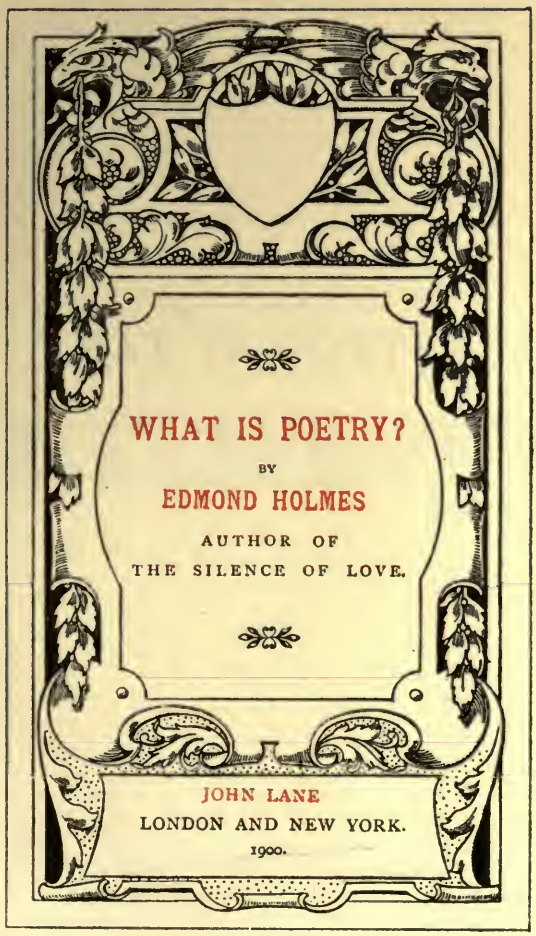
*In preparation, uniform with this volume and with* THE SILENCE OF LOVE, *a new volume of Poems, by the same author, entitled* WITHOUT AND WITHIN.


WHAT IS POETRY?
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# WHAT IS POETRY?

"Poetic creation, what is this but seeing the thing sufficiently? The word that will describe the thing follows of itself from such intense clear sight of it.

*T. Carlyle.*

# WHAT IS POETRY?

## PART I.

### FEELING.

WHAT is poetry? There are as many answers to this question as there are minds that take an interest in it; for in the attempt to answer it each of us is perforce thrown back upon that unformulated philosophy which is an essential aspect of his inmost self, a philosophy which emancipates him from the control of all schools and sects, and in expounding which (so far as it admits of exposition) he tells the story of his heart and makes confession of his faith. When I ask myself, What is poetry? I am setting myself a task which far "exceeds man's might." I am inviting myself to solve, by implication, all the master problems of human

thought. And if I take my own answer seriously, I do so not because I think that the question can be answered, but because I know well that it cannot; not because I flatter myself that I have succeeded where others have failed, but because I see in the failure which awaits us all, convincing proof that the problem is worthy of our highest endeavours, and that each answer in turn is as real and true as the individual life which it summarizes and the personality which it expresses and reflects.

Cardinal Newman has somewhere said that without assumptions no one can prove anything about anything. To prove that poetry is what I believe it to be is beyond my power and beyond my aim. But the scope of Newman's aphorism may surely be extended. Without assumptions no one can begin to think about anything. For every enterprise of thought one needs what soldiers call a base of operations. I am about to set out on one of the most desperate of all enterprises; and in order to provide myself with a base, I must ask to be allowed to make two initial assumptions :—

(1) that poetry is the expression of strong and deep feeling;

(2) that wherever there is feeling, there is something to be felt.

Let us consider each assumption in turn.

*Poetry is the expression of strong and deep feeling.*

By strong feeling I mean feeling that is vehement, passionate, intense; feeling that burns rather than broods. By deep feeling I mean feeling that is subtle, delicate, mystical; feeling that broods rather than burns. Is it possible for feeling to be strong without being deep, or deep without being strong? Yes and No. Strength can exist apart from depth; and depth can exist apart from strength. But neither can develop itself freely or fully except it be modified by the other. Feeling that is strong without being deep is violent; in other words, it is not really strong. Feeling that is deep without being strong is dreamy and fantastic; in other words, it is not really deep. It needs the red light of passion to pierce the darkness of the inner life; but if the fire of passion burns too furiously, it will speedily burn itself away. It must be understood then that in poetic emotion, as I conceive of it, strength is inseparable from depth; and, therefore, that whenever I apply the term *passionate* to poetry or the poet's heart, I take for granted that the passion is not all flame and fury, but is strong enough to control itself.

That poetry is the expression of strong

and deep emotion, that, in Wordsworth's well-known words, it is the "spontaneous overflow of *powerful feelings*," will, I think, be generally admitted. When I use the word *poetry*, I am of course thinking of the higher kinds of poetry. I am thinking of the *pius vates*, the inspired bard. In ordinary parlance the word *poetry* is used as loosely as the word *music*. But just as there is an impassable abyss between the music-hall song of the hour and the symphony of a great master, so there are many kinds of verse which are not in the slightest degree poetical. To try to prove an assumption is to undermine the very foundations of one's thought ; but if proof were needed of the truth of my thesis that poetry is the expression of strong and deep feeling, it would surely be found in the indisputable fact that whenever one of the lower kinds of poetic composition rises for a while to the level of true poetry, it is lifted above itself by a passing wave of genuine emotion. Satire, for example, becomes poetical when, and only when, it is inspired by *saeva indignatio* ; and even *vers de société*, as they are called, become worthy of the sacred name of poetry when, but only when, they are pervaded by that subtle humour which is near of kin to one of the deepest and most delicate of all feelings, *pathos*.

There is one significant point of view from which it may be profitable for us to consider the connection between poetry and feeling. The poet is commonly regarded as the typical embodiment of genius, as the representative of those who owe their best work to a constraining power which they cannot control. In ancient days he was supposed to be divinely inspired; and we still speak, not wholly in jest, of the divine *afflatus*, of seasons of inspiration, of the presence of the Muse, and so forth. Now when we say that true poetry is the outcome of genius, we imply that the true poet has an essentially passionate nature. For one of the leading characteristics of genius, and the one which more than any other has led men to regard it as divinely inspired, is its *tyranny*, the irresistible nature of its influence, the inevitable character of its work. On this point the evidence of those who have felt the storm and stress of genius must carry special weight.

"I do but sing because I must"

is the cry—the boast shall I call it, or the apology?—of every true poet. And there is no true poet who has not again and again been mastered by that strange feeling of helplessness in the hands of an inward and spiritual power, to which the Hebrew prophet gave memorable

expression: "Then I said, I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His Name. But His Word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing and I could not stay." The belief in inspiration has not wholly died out; and I, for one, see no reason why it should ever die. The doctrine needs but a change of notation to become entirely true to fact. The poet is indeed stirred and swayed by a power which is so far not his own, that he cannot control its movements or consciously realize either its origin or its goal. But that power, though certainly supernormal, is not supernatural. Nay it is Nature herself, to use a word whose very comprehensiveness enables one to use it in safety, it is Nature herself that inspires the poet, moving him to her own ends and for her own purposes through the medium of an inborn bent of his inner being, a persistent pressure which she never relaxes until he has yielded himself to her will and begun to follow her guidance. Not that his submission, however complete it may be, can bring him lasting relief. For one of the most vital characteristics of poetic genius is that its claims upon its victim are infinite; that as it punishes his rebellion by blasting his life with the curse of a clinging sense of failure, the curse of having

missed his destiny and been treasonably false to his higher self, so it rewards his obedience, not with peace of mind, but with new unrest, by filling his heart with new desires, and showing him from each new height that he wins a higher sky-line and a wider world. The pressure put upon the poet by this bent of his nature—a pressure which is now strong and steady, now sudden and violent—is realized by him as *feeling*, so deep and so intense as to deserve the name of *passion*. Passion means suffering. The passionate heart is one that suffers much. What the poet suffers is not trouble or sorrow, though even to these he is perhaps more than ordinarily sensitive, but the stress of Nature's influence, the despotic might of his own inborn genius. In fine, the poet's is a "passionate heart" for this, if for no other reason, that it is his doom to be constrained and mastered by forces which are not his own, as being for ever beyond the control of his consciousness, and yet again intimately his own, as coming from his inner nature, as being in fact part of his buried self.

Perhaps I am dwelling too much on the emotional side of poetry. Even Wordsworth, who almost revered passion, remembered that the poet must think as well as feel. Having told us that "all good poetry is the spontane-

ous overflow of powerful feelings," he goes on to say, "though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings." I admit that the poet must have a reflective as well as a passionate nature, and that, if he is to do good work, his thought must interpret and co-ordinate his feelings, and so deepen, widen, and finally exalt and intensify them. But I hold that in the poet's mind thought must operate continuously and half-unconsciously, and that at the time of inspiration, though its influence must be apparent, it must itself be in the background; just as in the work of poetic composition artistic study and experience must make themselves felt, but must not betray their presence. Moreover, though it is doubtless true that "our thoughts are the representatives of all our past feelings," it is not less true that our feelings, which are being continually "modified and directed by our thoughts," are at any given moment representative of all our past thoughts; and perhaps it is even more essential for the poet's

thoughts to be "steeped in feeling" than for his feelings to be controlled by thought. Then again, the end and aim of thought is to lead us, by more or less circuitous routes, to truth. But the moments of exalted feeling are also moments of "passionate intuition," and, therefore, of clear and unerring insight; moments in which we seek truth no longer, but embrace it and make it our own. To quote Wordsworth once more, "the adamantine holds of truth" are built, not merely by "reason," but also by

> "passion, which itself
> Is highest reason in a soul sublime."

Even *brooding*, which may be defined as the reverie of passion, and which is the kind of reflection that is most congenial to the poetic temperament, is, I think, a higher form of meditation than *thinking* (in the strict and narrow sense of the word); for in the former state the mind lies open to the profound and subtle influences of Nature, whereas in the latter consciousness, that transparent medium which is opaque to the higher rays of spiritual light, interposes itself between the soul and truth; and whereas the brooding mind, in the course of its aimless wanderings, may sometimes come in contact with hidden truth, the

mind of the systematic thinker is led astray by its very desire for accurate knowledge, and fails in proportion to the completeness of its success. In any case, it must, I think, be admitted that the reflective side of the poet's nature is always subordinated to the emotional, and that it is the latter, not the former, which differentiates him from other men.

To what extent, we must now ask ourselves, is the poet differentiated from other men? When we say that he differs from them in having a stronger and subtler sensibility, do we mean that the feelings which it is his mission to express, are peculiarly his own? Do we mean, in other words, that poetic genius is an accidental departure from what is real and central in the nature of man? Surely not. If poetic genius were a mere freak of Nature, the poet would sing to himself alone. In other words, he would not sing at all. Language always expresses a common measure of experience. Were the poet's feelings exclusively his own, he could not possibly communicate them to others, for there would be no common ground on which he could meet his fellow-men. To give expression to monstrous or eccentric feelings is not the function of the poet. The feelings that inspire him belong to "the general heart of man." Nay, they are of

the inmost essence of human nature. The difference between the feelings of the poet and those of ordinary men is, to use the most pregnant and suggestive of antitheses, the difference between what is *actual* and what is *potential*. Feelings which are actual in the poet, in the sense of being vividly realized and brought near to the light of consciousness, have but a potential existence in the hearts of ordinary men. But they are there, in the darkness of the "buried life," waiting to be *actualized;* and it is because they are there that the message of the poet goes home to the hearts of his listeners. When we are moved by poetry there is no transfusion of feeling. What happens is, that expression is given to emotions which are ours and which we know to be ours, though we had not actually experienced them till we listened to the poet's words. The terms *potential* and *actual* are of course always used comparatively. What is actual from one point of view is potential from another. I sometimes think that every feeling is the embryo of another and a deeper feeling, and this of another, and so on *ad infinitum*. Thus the sense of outward beauty is implicit in the sense of sight: the sense of inward and spiritual beauty is implicit in the sense of outward beauty; and in the sense of inward

and spiritual beauty there is endless gradation, depth beneath depth, dream within dream, glory beyond glory. It follows from this conception that, in the act of consciously realizing a given feeling, we are unconsciously coming into contact with another and a deeper feeling; and, further, that the more clearly conscious we are of what goes on in the more accessible part of our inner life, the deeper we are able to go into its darker mysteries. It is in this respect, I think, that the poet differs most from ordinary men. The profounder side of human nature is nearer to the light of consciousness in him than in them; and so he is always conversant with deeper feelings than they are,—conscious of feelings of which they are but dimly conscious, dimly conscious of feelings of which they are wholly unconscious. The movement from consciousness to unconsciousness is, I need hardly say, as continuous as the change in our northern latitudes from light to darkness; but to express the continuity of Nature's processes is, unhappily, beyond the power of human speech.

It would seem, then, that the deep and strong feelings which poetry expresses are potentially common to all men, and that they belong to that deeper side of human nature which is for most of us an unknown land.

This unknown land is at last beginning to interest human thought. We hear much nowadays of the self that lies below the level of consciousness, the "subliminal self" of the psychical inquirer, the "buried life" of Matthew Arnold's beautiful poem, the "*vie profonde*," the "*âme*," the "*contrée lointaine*" of the Belgian mystic. Systematic attempts are being made to explore this shadowy region, in the hope of discovering what I may perhaps venture to call the magnetic pole of existence. Whatever may be the remoter issue of these daring enterprises, there is one thing at least which the explorers will not fail to report to us, namely, that the "buried life" is the home of those inward and spiritual feelings which it is the mission of poetry to express and reveal.

Let us now consider the second of my initial assumptions.

*Wherever there is feeling, there is something to be felt.*

This proposition is, I think, "as true as truth's simplicity." Feeling must have its object, for it is always the product, direct or indirect, of experience; and experience means contact with fact. We may, if we please, define feeling as the line or surface of contact between one's self and one's environment. It is

only through the medium of our feelings that "things," as we call them, are revealed to us: and though we find it convenient to assume that things exist apart from the feelings that they generate, this distinction always breaks down when our thought leans heavily on it; and in the last resort we find ourselves compelled to confess that feelings and things are inseparable. The apparent exceptions to the rule that I have formulated, the cases of (so-called) illusion, need not detain us long. For, in the first place, there may well be more in the phenomenon of mental illusion than is dreamed of in our philosophy; and, in the second place, the rule which these abnormal occurrences seem to violate does not pretend to be, and for my purpose need not be, more than approximately correct.

Feelings then are generated by experience of things; and as there are different kinds of feelings, so we may assume that, corresponding to these, there are different orders of things, different aspects of existence, different strata of reality. In some respects the different feelings are incommensurable with one another; but there is at least one point of view from which it seems to be possible to classify them, to arrange them, one might almost say, in order of merit. Some feelings announce themselves

to us as being higher, purer and nobler than others, and also (the one announcement being implicit in the other) as having been generated by higher realities. For example, the sense of beauty announces itself to us as being a higher sense than the sense of sight; and in and through this announcement it tells us that beauty is a more real property of things than either colour or form. So, again, the pleasure which we derive from hearing one of Beethoven's symphonies announces itself to us as being far higher and purer than the pleasure which we derive from eating a well-seasoned dish; and we feel instinctively that the things, whatever they may be, which generate the former kind of pleasure are immeasurably higher in the scale of reality than the things which gratify the sense of taste. Here, then, we seem to be provided with an inward criterion and standard of reality, a scale of dignity in our feelings which corresponds with a scale of reality in the things that surround us. Are we to accept this criterion, this standard of worth with which Nature has equipped us? Well, in the first place, we *must* accept it; for, speaking generally, it may be said that each feeling in turn constrains us to take it at its own valuation. And, in the second place, it may fairly be urged that apart from this inward

standard we have no criterion of reality. It is indeed sometimes contended that the objects of our bodily senses are real things, and that the objects of all our other senses are illusions and dreams. But surely to say that this little animal which calls itself Man, crawling about on the surface of one of the lesser satellites of one of the least of the innumerable stars, is able by means of his bodily senses, the senses which he shares with other animals, to see the Universe as it really is, is to make the most audacious and arrogant of all anthropocentric assumptions. Dismissing this hypothesis as gratuitous and absurd, we must either say that there is no standard of reality, or accept the inward standard and allow it to control our notions of what is real and true, and through this to determine our ideals and regulate our lives.

Now the strong and deep feelings which poetry expresses unquestionably belong to that higher side of one's being which has reality, in the deeper sense of the word, for its objective counterpart. Once the validity of the inward standard has been established, it becomes clear that the objects of the poet's feelings are as much more real than the superficial aspects of Nature and of life, as the feelings themselves are deeper and stronger than the surface feel-

ing of the average man ; for all who have ever experienced poetic emotion, whether in its creative or its responsive mood, will acknowledge that it sets a high value on itself, that it is imperiously self-assertive, that its very presence is a summons to us to accept its valuation not of itself alone but of all the feelings that sway us, and through these of all the things that we seek or shun. As there is a buried or subliminal self behind and beyond the ordinary self, so there is (we must believe) a buried world behind and beyond the ordinary world,—an order of things which far transcends in grandeur and reality that apparent order of things which, for the average man in his average moods, is the all-in-all of existence. To discern this buried world through the medium of his abnormal sensibility, and to reveal it to other men through the medium of kindled emotion, is the true function of the poet. In opposing the real to the apparent order of things I am using dualistic language, which I cannot justify except by pleading that human speech is unable to measure the infinite subtlety of Nature. I know well that there are not two orders of things only, but many orders, and that the movement from the pole of appearance to the pole of reality is as continuous as any other natural

movement; and I can even amuse myself by imagining that, as we have feeling behind feeling, carrying us deeper and deeper into the darkness of the buried self, so we have world behind world, carrying us deeper and deeper into the *vie profonde* of the Universe.* Nevertheless, the exigencies of speech being what they are, I must continue to oppose the real to the apparent order, trusting that my readers will interpret the words in the sense in which I use them.

*The poet then sees the real order of things, and his vision kindles profound emotion in his heart.* That this view of poetry, though seldom consciously taken, is in substantial agreement with what I may call the accepted view, seems to be proved by two significant facts. In the first place it has ever been held that in the poet's nature *passion* has its counterpart in *vision.* In bygone days men believed that the poet was divinely inspired, in other words that hidden truth was supernaturally revealed to him ; and this belief has its modern equivalent in the idea that insight, the power of

* This thought is not wholly fantastic. It means no more than this, that Reality—the inmost soul of things—reveals itself under different aspects to the different orders of our perceptive faculties, from the simplest and most sensuous to the obscurest and most spiritual, and that each aspect in turn constitutes a new "world."

seeing into the heart of a thing and discerning its hidden properties, is of the very essence of the poetic faculty. In the second place, it is a commonplace of criticism that in the higher forms of poetic creation, such as the Drama, fidelity to Nature is the first thing needful, and its absence the worst of defects. We are apt to talk about the poet as if he were a mere dreamer of idle dreams; but we know in our hearts that he is a seer and revealer of hidden truth. Even the worldling's earnest conviction that poetry is all moonshine is but a back eddy on the surface of an irresistible stream.

We must now ask ourselves, where is the real order of things to be found? Is it in our hearts or in the Universe that lies around us? The poet is no metaphysician, but (perhaps for that very reason) he is the best of philosophers. He resolutely refuses to separate the inward from the outward, the subjective from the objective aspects of existence. The real order of things is in Nature, and Nature is a living and indivisible whole. That is the whole of his philosophy, and it has the twofold merit of being a simple and comprehensive conception. He may never have heard of what metaphysical writers call the "*ego*," but if you were to talk to him about it, he, or rather his "subliminal self," would probably tell you

that the *ego* belongs to the outward world quite as much as the outward world belongs to the *ego;* or, again, that mind volatilizes matter in the act of perception quite as much by diffusing itself through material things and entering into quasi-chemical combination with them as by absorbing them into itself. The dualism of the common-sense philosopher is profoundly repugnant to the poet: so is the one-sided monism of the materialist or the "*ego*"-maniac. Hence it is that, when he deals with outward nature, he is no mere word-painter. He leaves it to the second-rate novelist to describe *scenery*, as we call it, for its own sake. It is the spiritual significance of outward things which appeals to him, and to which he strives to give expression in his verse. The intense sympathy which he feels for outward things is thrown back, like reflected light, upon the inner life of man; and the all-pervading unity of Nature makes the outward order symbolical at every turn of the inward. More than that, the feelings which outward things awake in him are ever transforming themselves into feelings about inward things. Thus for him the violence of the autumnal tempest sweeps through the voids of the human heart; and when he watches the "long moon-silvered roll" of the sea, the "peace that

passeth all understanding"—a peace which is half passion, half repose—seems to shed a pathway of light on the mystic depths of the "buried life." And if he spiritualizes the outward world, he gives form and substance to the inward. The soul for him is no abstraction, but a reality whose life is inextricably bound up with that of "inanimate Nature," expresses itself in outward action and can be depicted only by the aid of material images.

An illustration will help me to explain what I mean. The summer dawn is, I think, one of the most beautiful of all physical phenomena. The purity and freshness of the air, the speaking stillness, the ever-changing colours and ever-growing glories of the eastern sky, all minister to our senses and fill us with delight. But for some of us this deep emotion transforms itself into a larger and profounder feeling. The triumph of day over night has ever been symbolical of the triumph in the Universe of spiritual light over darkness; but when we witness the dawn and receive its message into our hearts, we are not content merely to recognize the fitness of this simile. In and through the feelings that the beauty and wonder of the dawn have generated, another feeling, at once more subtle and more intense, begins to live and work in our hearts;

a feeling of inexpugnable certitude ; a sense of partnership in a world-wide and eternal victory ; an overmastering conviction that the problems which baffle us, the riddles which mock us, have no real existence, the whole course of Nature being in very truth as sure, as clear, and as glorious as the dawn of day. And as this feeling takes possession of us, we seem at last to become one with the "pure eternal course of things," to share in its transcendent serenity, in its absolute immunity from fear and bewilderment and doubt. It is the function of the poet who describes the dawn to experience this incommunicable feeling and awake it in us. He can do this by so painting the dawn as to ravish our bodily senses through the medium of memory and imagination, and then leaving it to us to discover, behind and beyond the more sensuous feeling, that deeper emotion which I have vainly tried to describe. We are all familiar with Shakspeare's two immortal couplets :

> "Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
> Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain-tops"

and

> "But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
> Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.

For me all the magic of the dawn is in these

lines. All my past experiences of the early summer morning live again as I repeat to myself their simple words, and once more, in and through my half-sensuous delight, I read for a moment the innermost secret of the Universe. But sometimes the poet leads us nearer to the spiritual feeling and half suggests it to us. When Tennyson tells us that the breeze which heralds the dawn

> " died away ;
> " And East and West, without a breath,
> Mixt their dim lights, like life and death,
> To broaden into boundless day."

he reveals the feeling of triumphant conviction even to those who had never been conscious of its existence, he shows them that it belongs to them and has ever belonged to them, and he makes it live and work in their hearts.

I am trying to prove that in the poet's philosophy the inward and outward aspects of existence are ever tending to lose themselves in a higher unity. In the lines from " In Memoriam," which I have just quoted, we surely find an apt illustration of this tendency. The dawn of hope in the poet's heart after a long night of sorrow, sends him for sympathy to earth and sky at the mystic hour of their dawn ; and then and there, in the very heart of

inanimate Nature, he finds himself face to face with the most inward and spiritual of all experiences. His individual hope loses itself in a mighty hope for the whole Universe: nay, hope itself passes beyond itself into an all-embracing and all-conquering certitude, as before his gazing eyes the "dim lights" of "East and West," of "life and death"

"broaden into boundless day."

It has been well said that the poet always sees the universal in the particular. The reason of this is that he goes so deep into himself (and, therefore, into outward things) by the force of his emotion and insight, that he at last reaches a level of existence below that (perhaps I ought to say *above* that) at which Nature seems, for the individual consciousness, to bifurcate into the subjective and objective worlds; a level which is, comparatively speaking, near to that universal, world-deep life in which all things—inward and outward, animate and inanimate—live and move and have their being. He is thus able to free the individual *ego* from the bonds of subjectivity, and to send it forth into the outward world, whence, after diffusing itself through all material things, it returns to him as the universal *ego*,—from one point of view the inner life of the Cosmos,

from another his own true self. In other words, he both spiritualizes the outward and visible world, and universalizes the inward and spiritual life. I sometimes think that the very mainspring of poetry is a desire—a dim and instinctive, but profound and passionate desire —to escape from self (in the narrow sense of the word), to expand the soul till it shall transcend all wonted limits, and at once lose and find itself in the larger life of the living Whole. If this be so, then the old-world ideas of poetic ecstasy, rapture, inspiration, of the poet being carried out of himself, transported beyond himself, may after all have some foundation in sober fact. The desire to escape from self may be in some sort its own cause and its own fulfilment.

We shall do well, then, to follow the guidance of the poet, and say that the hidden realities which kindle poetic emotion belong neither to the inward nor to the outward order, but to the cosmic order, to Nature as such,— the buried life of the poet's heart being strangely akin to, and perhaps in the last resort identical with, the buried life of the world that lies around him. Reality, such reality as Man is competent to discover, reality, wherever or whatever it may be, is the object of the poet's vision, and the source of those large and

exalted feelings to which he seeks to give expression.

That I may the more clearly explain my conception of poetry, I will now try by its aid to solve certain insoluble problems, with which every lover of poetry is fated to torment himself.

*In what relation does poetry stand to science?* The question is often asked, seldom answered. Both poetry and science "find the real in the unapparent." Both go below the surface of things. Both go behind and beyond what is palpable. The difference between them is that from the same starting point they go off in diametrically opposite directions,*

* It will be asked, How can poetry and science both go below the surface of things and yet go off in diametrically opposite directions? In answer to this question, I can but say that it is never wise to lean heavily on a metaphor. I have said much about the *buried* life, the *deeper* feelings, the life *below* the surface of consciousness and so forth; but I have never allowed my thought to become enslaved to this metaphor, for such it is, of *depth*. We all know from experience that we have two kinds of sub-conscious life, one material and the other spiritual. Nearly all the processes of our animal life—processes of digestion, secretion, disintegration, re-integration of tissue, &c.—go on without our being in the least aware of what is happening. But this sub-conscious life of the body has nothing in common with the inner life of the soul. If the former life may fitly be spoken of as *sub-conscious*, the term *super-conscious* ought in strictness to be applied to the latter, consciousness itself being likened to the surface of the sea, which is also

science in the direction of analysis, poetry of higher synthesis. I have tried to show how poetry deals with the phenomenon of the dawn. We speak of the dawn as *a* physical phenomenon. It is really a synthesis of an infinite number of physical phenomena. Science is ready, if we ask it, to take each of these and analyse it into its constituent elements and underlying laws. In this way it carries us beyond and behind the apparent, but in doing so it disintegrates the objects of our

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the surface of the atmosphere, and which is balanced, as it were, between the two infinities of water and air. This simile may serve to throw light on the antithetical relation in which poetry stands to science. If the conscious life of body and soul, which seems to us in our ordinary moods to be the whole of life, has as its objective counterpart that superficial aspect of existence which seems to us in our ordinary moods to be the whole world, may it not be that the sub-conscious life of the body has as its objective counterpart that material base of existence towards which science is ever tending to work its way by analysing things into their parts and elements, while the sub-conscious life of the soul has as its objective counterpart that supreme synthesis towards which poetry is ever tending to work its way by building things up, in and through the act of perception, into indivisible wholes. (It is worthy of note that both in the sub-conscious and in the super-conscious life the distinction between subject and object, which is clearly marked in the light of consciousness, is ever tending to vanish). But though this simile is useful and suggestive, I propose, when dealing with the sub-conscious life of the soul, to adhere to the time-honoured metaphor of *depth*: I propose to say, in accordance with established usage, that poetry expresses *deep* emotions which have their home in the *buried* life.

emotions and disenchants our hearts. One by one, the various qualities of things, from the most spiritual down to the most material, vanish at the probing touch of science, until at last we begin to see looming in the dim background, the phantom shadows, the pale abstractions of Mathematics, the science that underlies all other sciences, the Goddess of the dead,

> " Who gathers all things mortal
> With cold immortal hands."

We are not deeply moved when the physicist talks to us about the rotation of the earth on its axis, the declination of the sun below the horizon, and the reflection of its light by the air and the clouds and vapour suspended in it: but we are deeply moved when the poet tells us (the words are so beautiful that I must ask permission to repeat them once more) that

> " East and West, without a breath,
> Mixt their dim lights, like life and death,
> To broaden into boundless day."

The physicist disintegrates the various phenomena of the dawn. The poet fuses them by the force of his emotion into the glorious and wonderful whole which generates his emotion, poetic emotion being essentially a synoptic faculty, whose very receptivity makes it crea-

tive and whose fire is both lit and reflected by the objects of its vision. And as the emotion deepens, even this synthesis no longer contents him. The whole panorama of the dawn becomes a transient aspect of a higher and yet more spiritual synthesis, and he seems at last to be feeling his way towards the highest of all syntheses, the One in the Many, "the only source of all our life and light." It is true that science too seeks for unity in multiplicity; but it is unity of relation that it seeks, not unity of substance—the unity of an all-controlling *law*, not the unity of an all-sustaining *life*. The difference between them may be looked at from another point of view. Both aim at knowledge; but whereas science desires to know all about things, poetry desires to know them as one knows the heart of a familiar friend. The physicist entirely detaches himself from the objects of his investigation: the poet identifies himself as closely as possible with the objects of his emotion. If we could imagine a physicist, pure and simple, and a poet, pure and simple, standing side by side and watching a glorious sunset, the one would be wondering how the given colours got into the sky and trying to solve the corresponding problem or problems, whereas the other would be striving to lift the veil that hangs between

what he feels and what he sees, to merge his being in the splendour of the western sky, to absorb its life into his own. Science and poetry may be said to derive their respective titles to existence from charters which Nature herself has conferred upon them. Science is bound by its charter to be cold, impersonal, unemotional. Poetry is bound by its charter to be warm, personal, passionate. If we would realize how far apart from one another the two can be carried in the pursuit of their respective ideals, let us first read, or try to read, a scientific masterpiece — a profound mathematical treatise, let us say—and then turn from it to a poetical masterpiece, to the "Agamemnon," let us say, or to "King Lear." I can well believe that, just as "too far East is West," so poetry and science starting from the actual and going off in opposite directions will meet at last. I can well believe that what is ultimate in analysis will be found in the last resort to coincide with what is ultimate in synthesis, matter resolving itself into force, and force, which after all is the expression of an inward experience, being traced up to the only fountains of force of which we have personal experience, namely, will and love. Meanwhile, however, we must face the fact that, though poetry and science both seek for the

real in the apparent, their search for reality carries them in diametrically opposite directions, that they are therefore antithetical though not really antagonistic to one another, and that they have widely different functions to fulfil.

What is *imagination*, and what part does it play in poetry? It is commonly regarded as the most poetic of poetic gifts; and yet for many persons, including some who profess to admire poetry, it is a mendacious faculty, a faculty by means of which we amuse ourselves with delusions and dreams. If this were so, the poet would be a mere weaver of fantastic fairy tales, and we should be at a loss to account for his authority and influence, and for the high honour which has ever been paid to him. If we would know what imagination really is, let us first study it in its more homely and familiar forms. Its work may be said to begin where that of perception and memory ends. Perception deals with what one sees. Memory with what one has seen. Imagination is the power of picturing the unseen: or, to be more precise, of realizing familiar things in new combinations, in combinations which go beyond the limits of our actual experience. Such a power evidently depends for its effective

existence on a just and true perception of what is within our experience. For example, it is by means of imagination that we can in some measure realize scenes in other countries and other ages. But it would be impossible for us to realize such scenes if we had no feeling for or insight into the scenes with which we are familiar. You are told one or two facts about the meeting of two persons whom you know, and then left to imagine the whole scene. You will be able to imagine it, to realize what actually happened, just so far as you really *know* the persons, or in other words have a sympathetic insight into their characters and, therefore, an instinctive appreciation of what they would say and do in the given circumstances. This is imagination in its more everyday form. Yet even here one sees how great is its power and how vast are its capacities. And even here one sees that reality is its object, and sympathy its proximate source.

What makes imagination possible is the unity and self-identity of Nature. Nature is one with itself, in spite of its infinite variety, from pole to pole of its being; and, therefore, to know any given portion of it is to have a partial or rather a potential knowledge of the rest. But in order to go far beyond the

horizon of experience, we must have something more than a superficial knowledge of Nature: we must have a knowledge of it so true and deep as to enable us to penetrate to the heart of the universe, to that centre of things which may be reached from all parts, and is the same for all parts, of the ensphering surface. We must have, as it were, a clue to Nature as a whole, a clue which is vouchsafed only to those who have got to what is vital and essential in their own experience, if we are to go boldly, as the greatest of us have done, into every winding of its labyrinth. In other words, imagination of a high order implies insight which is unusually penetrative and clear.

It is this high order of imagination which is characteristic of the poet. If it requires imagination to make mental pictures of scenes which are presented to us in words, it requires imagination of a far higher order to call such scenes into being. The imagination of the poet is active where ours is passive. It creates new combinations of things where ours does but attempt to realize them.

Now in such creations truth to Nature is the first thing demanded. The poet must have analysed the objects of his experience into their essential parts before attempting to reconstruct them, or his structures will fall to pieces at the

first probing touch. It is in virtue of high imagination that the Drama is possible; and it is a truism to say that in the Drama to depart from Nature is to go far astray. When a dramatist depicts things as they ought not to be, when he combines in the same person incompatible powers and purposes, when he carries out tendencies into inappropriate action, we say at once that his work is bad; and we account for this by attributing to him either a defective imagination or an imperfect insight into character. This again shows that imagination is the other self of insight, and that reality is the object of both.

That daring form of imagination in which, after a faultlessly correct analysis, the essential elements of things are re-combined into wholes which are not only beyond actual but even beyond possible experience, is very rare and is a mark of exceptional genius. It might indeed seem as if here, at its highest point, imagination deliberately departed from Nature. But no: even here the great poet is true to essential reality. No one was ever more daringly imaginative than the creator of the "Tempest" and the "Midsummer's Night's Dream," and it is of him that Lamb says, in language which is as true as it is paradoxical, "Where he seems most to recede from humanity he will be found

the truest to it. From beyond the scope of Nature if he summon possible existences, he subjugates them to the law of her consistency. He is beautifully loyal to that sovereign directness even when he seems most to betray and desert her. Caliban, the Witches are as true to the laws of their own nature (ours with a difference) as Othello, Hamlet, Macbeth."

These examples show that the essence of imagination is perception of hidden truth. That its source is vivid emotion seems to be generally allowed and is certainly in keeping with the conception which we have formed of it. We have seen that the one thing needed to generate imagination is this, to know one's own sample of Nature so truly and so well, that one gets as it were the key to the whole and so can picture and even construct the rest. Now there is one sample of Nature which is intimately and for all time one's own, and that is one's own self. Know your own self well, and you will be able to imagine how others think and feel, to anticipate their desires and impulses, to forecast their aims and purposes, and so to construct in any given case their probable courses of action. But self-knowledge depends not upon introspection, not upon psychological study, but upon the vividness of one's own inner life. You are yourself at once

subject and object. Your very existence is potential self-knowledge. Realize yourself—live strongly and vividly—and your self-knowledge will become actual, and through it you will gain that insight into human nature, that wide and subtle sympathy which is imagination's other self.

Not that even this is the whole of imagination. That Protean faculty has another and a yet wider self. The poet's imagination does more than give him insight into human nature. It gives him insight into the heart of cosmic nature, into the very "soul of things." The subtle and indefinable atmosphere of beauty with which he invests his creations, and which we rightly regard as one of the highest products of his imagination, is no mere mirage of an overheated brain. Experience, as genuine as it is obscure, has generated it; and reality, as profound as it is impalpable, is its counterpart. The ether waves of spiritual charm that vibrate through the poet's work, vibrate eternally through all the realms of existence. When poetry enchants us, they flash, for a fleeting instant, on our sight.

"The light that never was on sea or land,"

a light which ever was, and is, and shall be, though most eyes are blind to it, is *seen* by

the poet, seen with that "inward eye" which is the true organ of imagination, and revealed to us through the medium of the emotion which his voice kindles in our hearts. And it is because he is intensely emotional and, therefore, abnormally sensitive and impressionable, that he is able to perceive rays of light to which the rest of us are blind. In other words, the imagination that enables him to discover and reproduce Nature's obscurer aspects, is the outcome of the sensibility that enables him to respond to Nature's more occult influences. In fine, the very qualities of his work which we are most ready to attribute to his perfervid imagination, the rarer and more volatile essences to which his poetry owes its special charm, have been distilled by his passionate sympathy, not from the dreams of a disordered mind, but from some of the most real, though doubtless least palpable, of Nature's environing realities. On no other hypothesis can we account for their presence and their attractive force.

Perhaps the highest achievement of which imagination is capable is that of *realizing* that the true order of things in the universe is in the last resort unimaginable. Ordinary men in their ordinary moods are disposed to rest in the evidence of their bodily senses, and regard it as adequate and conclusive; and so, when they

"exercise themselves in great matters" they are content to think, or rather to have their thinking done for them, in signs and symbols, in pictures and images. But the poet, born artist though he be, is also a born iconoclast. When we say that he is emotional along the whole range of his nature, we imply that his sub-conscious and supersensual perceptive faculties are abnormally developed; and, thanks to these faculties, he is able to feel his way through those unimaginable regions which for most men are a land of dreams and shadows, but for him are alone substantial and real. Moreover, though he is keenly sensitive to the charm of outward form, he never, even for a passing moment, mistakes the symbol for the thing symbolized. Nay, it is because beauty, the beauty of outward form, has a special fascination for him, because it inflames his thirst even while it seems to quench it, that he is ever tending to pass beyond it in quest of that ideal beauty which is veiled from his eyes by the very symbols that profess to reveal it. His quest, as he knows well, is endless.

> "For though his soul sail leagues and leagues beyond,
> Still leagues beyond those leagues there is more sea."

The poet climbs the "hills of Time," not in order that he may rest on their summits or

look down from them into the "vale of Time," but in order that he may discover from their watch-towers the cloudlike outlines of the "mountains of Eternity." As the unattainable is the only adequate object of his heart's desire, so it is only in the sphere of the unimaginable that his imagination can find its appointed home. Nor is this negative form of imagination, this faith in and thirst for the unimaginable, as barren and inoperative as it might seem to be to the careless observer. On the contrary, it is active and even creative on the largest scale and in the highest degree. For it is within the illimitable limits which it assigns to man's latent capacity for desire and wonder, that all the more familiar forms of imagination, fostered by freedom and quickened by the stimulus of an unattainable ideal, live and move and have their being.

Deep feeling, then, is the source of imagination. Insight into the heart of Nature is of its essence. Reality is its end and aim. We sometimes speak of it as if it were one among many faculties; or rather as if it were the peculiar endowment of a few exceptional men. It is not. It is the true life of each of us. If it does not initiate all or even many of us into Nature's diviner mysteries, it does one work in which, and in the fruition of which, even the

least of us may share; it "makes the whole world kin." To be entirely without it is to be less than a man. In its highest form it

> Is but another name for absolute power
> And clearest insight, amplitude of mind,
> And Reason in her most exalted mood.

I have said that the imagination of the poet is active and creative where ours is passive and receptive. *Creation* and *imitation* have often been contrasted, and it is still in dispute which of the two elements ought to predominate in art. I know little of any art but poetry, but I feel sure that there the creative and imitative tendencies are neither enemies nor rivals, but fellow-labourers and friends. Poetry is creative just so far as it is truly imitative, and it is truly imitative just so far as it is creative. To create without imitating is to weave tissues of gossamer. To imitate without creating is to twist ropes of sand. The poet does not invent a new order of things. He sees the real order. The world is what it is. To see it as it really is, to interpret it and represent it to us who cannot see so clearly or so well,—this is the highest aim of poetry, and fidelity to Nature is its crowning triumph. So far the poet is imitative. On the other hand, his interpretation of Nature is deeply different from that of the botanist or

the geologist. He is not faithful to Nature as these would conceive of fidelity. His sense is for general effects, which exist only for those who are able to see them. Astronomy knows nothing of "the silence that is in the starry skies." Geology knows nothing of "the sleep that is among the lonely hills." These are aspects of Nature that live only in the poetic heart: but they are real aspects and not fictions. He who feels them and brings them home to our feelings deals with realities. He reproduces what is actually existent. He does not invent. But this real order of things which it is his privilege to discern and his mission to reveal, is presumably a hidden order. For ordinary men in their ordinary moods the objects of the poet's insight can scarcely be said to exist. In seeing and revealing them he brings them, as it were, to the birth: he produces rather than reproduces: he creates rather than imitates.

For example. It is as correct to speak of the "creations" of a great dramatist as it is to say, with Aristotle, that the function of the Drama is to "imitate" action. In the Drama indeed it is obviously essential that the poet should be both imitative and creative; but there is no branch of poetry in which the co-operation of the two tendencies is not indispensable to success. Look at Keats's "Ode to Autumn," a poem

which, though perhaps too non-human to be really great, is yet within its limits well-nigh perfect. It will be found, if the poem be analysed, that it is as accurate* as it is imaginative, as faithful to the actual as it is to the ideal. Read it line by line. Each detail comes from Nature. The poet does not invent it. He opens his eyes and sees what is there for anyone to see. He accepts what he is given. So far as he does this, he is imitative, passively imitative and nothing more. But the poem is far more than a mere list of natural phenomena. It is in a sense a revelation. It enables us, perhaps for the first time, to realize in all its strength and subtlety the influence of Autumn. That overflowing wealth, evidence of a perfection which is itself the first beginning of decay; that melancholy beauty, melancholy because the beauty of perfection must needs lack the radiant freshness of hope and promise; these we feel as we never felt them before. The poet has the secret of Autumn. He understands it and helps us to understand it. To do this is to reveal, and to reveal is to create.

Let us ask ourselves what the poet has

* The personification of Autumn in the second stanza is of course a mere matter of "notation," which in no way detracts from the accuracy, the fidelity to material fact, of the whole poem.

done. In any scene of outward nature there is an infinite host of details, the mere enumeration of which would overtask the resources of the most conscientious of naturalists. The poet discards ninety-nine out of every hundred of these and lets the hundredth remain. The author of the "Ode to Autumn" has seen by a miracle of insight which of the details of autumnal scenery are essential to autumnal beauty, or at any rate to the particular aspect of autumnal beauty which he wishes to represent. These he has brought together, invested with the subtle charm of poetic diction and rhythm, grouped according to their power over our hearts, and built up into a perfect whole, the exquisite picture of the poem. The faculty that enables him to do this is active rather than passive. Passive imitation, though indispensable, is in itself nothing. To string together twenty or thirty details, faultlessly correct though each may be, no more makes a picture than to string together twenty or thirty words makes a sentence or a stanza. Say, if you will, that to represent beauty is to represent what belongs to Nature, and that therefore the poet even in his highest flights is still imitative. In a sense he is. But there is a difference, not merely of degree but of kind, between the power of imitating what is palpable and the

power of imitating, if we are still to use the word, what is hidden. The former furnishes the ὕλη or "matter" of poetry. The latter gives it its "form." To imitate what is palpable is indispensable to poetic creation. To imitate what is hidden is itself to create.

True poetry, then, is both imitative and creative. The two tendencies are in perfect harmony with one another, and the feud between them is a mere figment of the critic's brain. The kindred feud between *realism* and *idealism* in art is equally hollow and futile. If the realist is one who strives to represent reality, then all true artists are realists, and the idealist is of all realists the most uncompromisingly realistic. For what is the idealist? Is he not one who seeks to realize an ideal, to give outward form to an inward vision, in fine to express feelings which are large and deep and which seem to him to be supremely true and beautiful? Such a man may fairly claim to have taken service under the banner of reality; for the feelings that haunt him are inexplicable (so he unconsciously argues) except on the assumption that they have reality of a high order for their counterpart. In the light of his inward vision he sees that our (so-called) realities are in very truth

"such stuff as dreams are made of"; and so his quest of the ideal is the outcome of a profound discontent with the actual and of a passionate desire to discover the real. It is true that in his attempt to interpret his far-off feelings he is liable, perhaps more liable than ordinary men, to quit the high road of experience and lose himself in fantastic byways. But that is an accident with which I need not concern myself. In aim, at any rate, the idealist is a whole-hearted realist. The real feud is not between idealism and realism, but between realism and that conception of art which has recently usurped the name of realism, but which ought, I think, to be called *actualism*. The poet, like every other true artist, knows that the real order of things is deeply different from the apparent order, and from this he instinctively argues that if he is to be faithful to reality, he must represent things, not as they are in all their material detail,* but as they seem to be when he sees them through the medium of the emotion which they themselves kindle in his heart: he argues, in other

* To represent things as they are *in themselves* (if these words have any meaning) is of course impossible. What things may be in themselves is no concern of ours. Our choice lies between representing things as they seem to be to our ordinary senses, and as they seem to be to those deeper and rarer perceptive faculties which are yet potentially common to all men.

words, that true realism is based on fidelity to feeling rather than to apparent fact. But realism, in the modern sense of the word, pseudo-realism as I prefer to call it, holds that fidelity to material detail is of the essence of true art. To call such a conception of art realistic is to beg the question that is in dispute. If our bodily senses are competent to see the world as it really is, then it is certain that fidelity to the actual is the highest of artistic virtues; and it is equally certain, to go a step further, that art in general and poetry in particular have no business to exist. For art in general and poetry in particular exist in order to protest against that superficial conception of truth which is based on the average man's uncritical prejudice in favour of the actual, a prejudice which, owing to the undue influence of physical science on contemporary thought, has recently been raised to the dignity of an artistic principle. From first to last the poet is inspired and sustained by an undying faith in the essential loveliness of Nature; and so when he finds, as he too often does, that truth, or what passes for truth, is sordid and repulsive, he instinctively assumes that he is not in contact with the *vraie vérité* of things; and in the strength of this conviction he passes behind the apparent and beyond the actual in quest of that hidden reality which is

(he must needs believe) both beautiful and true. I do not forget that the greatest poets have again and again made dreadful tragedies, ending apparently in irremediable misery, the themes of immortal verse. But what does this mean? This, I think,—that the poet sees not only that there is beauty in failure and suffering, but that beauty is fairer to our mortal eyes when it burns through the veil of failure and suffering than when it shines in a cloudless sky; just as the light of the sun is loveliest when it gilds the edges of dark and disastrous clouds.* Misery, in the inventions of the pseudo-realist, is what it seems to be to the superficial observer,—hideous and hopeless and hateful. Misery, in the creations of the master-poet, is, as in Nature, fringed, where it is darkest, with the lustre of a hidden light.

It is in the name of science and in the supposed interest of truth that the pseudo-realist photographs the actual. He forgets, when he calls himself a realist, that the ten-

* Tragedy has, of course, another meaning. There are certain rare and heroic qualities of human nature, and certain deep and obscure feelings of the human heart, which cannot unfold themselves except in the atmosphere of adversity, and which cannot fully unfold themselves except in response to the demand made upon them by some dire extremity of danger or distress. Perhaps it is from these rarer qualities and deeper feelings that the light comes which at last redeems misery from despair.

dency of science is to subordinate reality to truth.* And perhaps he would serve truth better if he were less jealous in its cause. For poetry, which subordinates truth first to beauty and then (through beauty) to reality, has, I think, a more genuine concern for truth than science itself.

I will now summarize the contents of this chapter in a few final sentences. Poetry is the expression of deep and strong feeling. Wherever there is feeling, there is something to be felt. Deep and strong feeling is generated by contact with, and implies perception of, hidden reality. In other words, poetic feeling has clear insight for its counterpart. The relation between emotion and insight is one of action and reaction. The emotionalness of the poet—his sensitive and sympathetic nature—enables him to see his way into the heart of things and to apprehend their deeper and truer properties. If these deeper and truer properties are to be apprehended at all, they must be

* The scientific mind desires to know the truth about things as fully and accurately as possible; and a quasi-professional bias in favour of its own subject-matter is ever tempting it to assume that what is most knowable is also most real,—an assumption which probably inverts the true order of things, for if the inward standard of reality may be trusted, what is most real is least knowable.

apprehended emotionally, for they are so great and real that they must needs kindle emotion in all who are permitted to discern them. In this way insight is ever tending to generate emotion, just as emotion is ever tending to generate insight.

In virtue of his emotional insight, the poet's mind is synthetic rather than analytic; creative as well as imitative; imaginative without being merely fanciful; idealistic, and therefore realistic, in the true sense of that much-abused word.

So much as to what the poet is in himself. But he cannot keep himself to himself. Strong feeling can never rest till it has found an outlet, and sooner or later the poet's emotional insight will have to express itself in some outward form.

In fine, then, and in brief, the poet is one who sees the real order of things in the universe, and who is so inspired by his vision that he is constrained to tell us what he has seen. How does he do this?

# WHAT IS POETRY?

## PART II.

## PART II.

### EXPRESSION

How does the poet make us feel what he feels, and so see what he has seen? To this question I answer, without hesitation, "By letting his feeling find its own voice."

If the writings of the master poets be carefully studied, it will, I think, be found that there are two features which their work, at any rate at its highest level, never lacks :—

(1) *Spontaneity.* True poetry is the natural and inevitable expression of strong feeling; the expression which the feeling has, as it were, found for itself.

(2) *The power of communicating feeling.* True poetry makes others feel what the poet himself has felt.

These are different aspects of the same essential quality. Let us consider each in turn.

*True poetry is the language which feeling finds for itself.*

In the first place, strong feeling must "wreak" itself "upon expression." When the fire is genuinely kindled, it cannot do less than break into a flame. "*Une pensée ferme et vive*," says a great critic, "*emporte nécessairement avec elle son expression.*" If this be true, as it surely is, it is still truer that intense emotion tends to give eloquence to the man whom it inspires. It is notorious that simple and uncultured natures find in moments of passion the exact word for what they feel, "*le mot juste et souvent unique.*" And as is the feeling, so will be the expression. A single jet of passion may find relief in a single word or sentence; but when emotion wells up in a perennial fountain, it needs an ampler and more permanent outlet for its flood. This it will find, if language be its normal medium of expression, in one channel only, that of poetry. It is possible that there are genuinely poetic souls who lack the poetic utterance. But, speaking generally, it is only in gaining its voice that strong emotion reaches its full strength. Feeling and expression act and react on one another. In the poetic nature there are innumerable feelings and shades of feeling, "*qui veulent naître.*" It is only in the poet that they are strong enough to come to the birth. Sometimes, though this is very rare, they come to the birth, but there

is not strength to bring forth. When, for example, I read Walt Whitman's formless "poems," I feel that I am witnessing the ineffectual birth-throes of feelings which are too large and too deep to find adequate utterance in human speech.

I have already quoted Wordsworth's well-known definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." That the overflow should be spontaneous is as essential as that the feelings should be powerful. Indeed it is because (as we have just seen) powerful feelings do and must overflow, that poetry is possible and, under certain conditions, inevitable; and, therefore, if the poet's verse lack spontaneity, we may rest assured that it has not been genuinely inspired. That the flow of poetic feeling should not be consciously regulated, that the current should be able to take and should be allowed to take its own course, is one of the first canons of poetic art. In poetry true feeling finds a voice. It is all important that it should find a true voice, find its own voice in fact, speak in its own language. This it will not do if the poet deliberately sets himself to observe, interpret, and express it. It is impossible for a man both to be swayed by strong emotion and to observe with intellectual interest the workings of his heart. The feeling that has begun to be analysed has ceased to exist. Or rather, if it is

a really deep feeling, it has found a refuge from the prying eye of consciousness in the darkness of the buried life. It follows that poets who write with clear consciousness write without inspiration; in other words, that they do not write poetry.

When I say this, I do not mean that the poet should work without intelligence and without a purpose, that he should simply wait for the *afflatus* and resign himself passively to its influence. I only mean that in his moods or seasons of creativeness, intelligence should be subordinated to inspiration, that the "divine madness" of passion should be supreme. Nor do I wish to suggest that the poet should hold himself absolved from obedience to the rules and principles of his art. But just as in the ferment of his feelings he is unconsciously brought into contact with large ideas and profound truths, so, in expressing his feelings, he must follow the canons of true art, but not of set purpose or with deliberate forethought. Rather he must follow them because he cannot help doing so, because they are part of his very self. It may indeed be the business of his life to instruct himself in his art, and to study its principles with a view to applying them. But at the time of composition, or at any rate in the moment of inspiration, his study must show

itself as instinct. His artistic instinct, his sense of the beautiful, trained and developed perhaps, but still an instinct, still a sense, must be his guide. He cannot lay down laws for himself beforehand. "His discretion must be his tutor." A poet might be a master of metre, but one would not expect him to write a scientific treatise on metrical form. One would scarcely be surprised if he failed to analyse his own metres, and proved unable to name or even describe the feet of which his lines are composed. Yet who knows what is beautiful in metre, or what forms of verse best lend themselves to what feelings, so truly and so sympathetically as the poet? He knows it so well, because the knowledge is part of himself; part, one might say, of the very feeling which forces expression for itself in his verse. What I say of metrical form holds good of every other aspect of poetical composition. Speaking generally, the poet is as little conscious in dealing with the principles of his art as in dealing with the ideas which his feeling reveals. A wise instinct leads him to follow a poet's advice,

> "Trust the spirit,
> As sovran Nature does, to make the form,
> For otherwise we only imprison spirit
> And not embody. Inward evermore
> To outward,—so in life, and so in art,
> Which still is life."

Given a deep and subtle sensibility; given a love of what is beautiful in language, in rhythm, and in melody; given a wide experience and a long course of training; given that one has breathed as an atmosphere beauty of outward and inward nature;—given all these, one has the promise and potency of a poet. But these avail nothing if the inspiration is wanting. They are the channels of poetic feeling. The flood which shall fill the channels, and flow through them in purity and strength, must be given by passion. Or, again, passion is a wind which finds in the poet an Æolian harp from which, as it passes, it awakes responsive music. The channels of the river, the strings of the harp, are given by nature, and prepared for use by culture and experience. They are always there, ready and expectant. But the poet must wait for the rising of the flood, or the river will not flow; he must wait for the blowing of the wind, or the harp will be silent. Both stream and wind must come in their own good time, and of their own inherent strength and tendency. We cannot do without them. Still less can we create them, or summon them into life.

When the work of composition has begun, it may perhaps proceed somewhat as follows. The first words that the feeling finds for itself call up others in harmony with themselves, and

these react upon and shape the feeling. The central idea demands a certain swing and flow in the verse; and the swing and flow of the verse demand certain words and phrases, which in their turn carry with them new shades of feeling—new aspects, as it seems, of the central idea, though not contemplated when the poet began to commune with the latter and strive to express it. So the poet works; feeling and form acting and reacting on one another, the form suiting itself to the feeling, and the feeling discovering in itself new depths and new subtleties in obedience to the demands and suggestions of the form. And all the while the poet is blind and unconscious. He knows neither the nature of his work, nor its object, nor its method.

Yet one hears of the "poetic pains," and one knows that the greatest poets have spent days over a single stanza, and years over a single poem. What does this mean? Not, I think, that the poet is working intelligently and with full consciousness, labouring in vain or with extreme difficulty to follow certain clearly defined rules, and bring his work into harmony with certain fully-apprehended principles; but rather that he is working gropingly and tentatively to satisfy a delicate and imperious instinct for what is true and beautiful. He will tell you

that there is something amiss with a certain word in a certain line, but he can give you no scientific explanation of its defect. It is enough for him that the word offends his ear. So far as he is concerned, this one fact suffices to condemn it. It is his ear, again, that must find the right word. Rules and principles are powerless to help him.

It is true that admirable poetry has been written, in which there is "not a line," to quote Goethe's words about himself, "but its author knew well enough how it got there"; but it is truer still that in the best passages of the greatest poems the lines read as if they had come there of their own accord. And, speaking generally, it may be said that in his seasons of inspiration the inspired poet is swayed by forces of which he can give no account, and which he cannot consciously control; that spontaneity, inevitableness, is one of the most vital characteristics of his work; that his verse is what it is because his deepest feelings have constrained him to express them thus and not otherwise, because, if he had not expressed them thus, they would not have gained the wished-for outlet of utterance.

So much as to my first thesis, that poetry is the *spontaneous* expression of strong feeling. My second thesis is that *poetry communicates*

*feeling, in the sense of making others feel what the poet himself has felt.*

When I say that poetry makes others feel, I mean that just as it expresses ideas and truths which are felt rather than consciously realised, so it brings home those ideas and truths, if at all, then to our feelings rather than to our reasoning faculties. It makes us give them a "real" rather than a "notional" assent. It makes us welcome and love them rather than accept them as demonstrably true. I mean also that to do this is no accident of its nature, but a vital and necessary function.

Poetry kindles feeling. Let it be studied under each of its many aspects, and it will be found that this law holds good.

To begin with, its outward form—its dress, if I may so call it—is beautiful; and beauty kindles emotion. That is why poetry falls as a rule into a metrical form. The charms of rhythm and melody arrest us, attract us, soothe us, stir us. We are led away for a moment from the average, every-day surface life, led away as we are by beautiful music or a beautiful scene. Larger, profounder, subtler feelings begin to flow. We begin to breathe the atmosphere that is breathed by the poet himself. We reach for a moment a height which is more habitually his. We are already prepared to hear

him speak to us, soul to soul. Indeed it may almost be said that in appreciating the beautiful form we are already embracing the idea that is embodied in it, embracing it and making it our own. I do not say that it is essential to poetry that it should be in verse. Now and again one meets with prose which, in point of outward attractiveness, is unsurpassed by the loveliest verse, prose which approaches the most successful forms of metre in rhythm and music, while more than rivalling them in delicacy of structure and exquisiteness of detail. But such prose is quite exceptional. As a rule, verse has what prose has not, or has in a less degree, —that beauty of outward form, that half-sensuous charm, to which all hearts are in some measure susceptible. So again, though blank verse occasionally rises to heights of stately and sonorous grandeur which are perhaps unattainable by rhymed metre of any sort or kind, still as a rule the latter has more charm than the former, and is therefore more quick, if not more potent, to awaken feeling. Hence it is that poems which express strong personal emotion fall naturally and almost inevitably into rhyme. We need not go far into the details of the metrist's art. It is enough for us to know that what he aims at is the production of beautiful effects. What the scientific writer is

altogether careless about is to him of supreme importance. His nature is pre-eminently artistic: the style, the external form of his work, is a matter of deep concern to him; and the meaning of this is that beauty,* the object of every artist's devotion, wakens the heart, makes it live. Yet the poet, as we shall presently see, is no mere artist in words. He values the outward form of his poetry not for its own sake, but for the sake of the thoughts and passions which it helps him to transmit to other hearts. Fidelity to feeling is his first and last concern. It will be an evil day for poetry when the poet loses himself in the craftsman, and his students and critics think less of what he says than of his manner of saying it.

So far, in my study of poetic expression, I have avoided burning questions. When I pass from metre to language I begin to tread on dangerous ground. The problem of poetic diction is a particular application of a larger and more vital problem which must be carefully considered before the solution of the lesser problem can be attempted. It is the fashion nowadays to demand individuality in poetry; and to such lengths

* This is one explanation of the beauty, the sensuous beauty, of poetry. Another is that it is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. A beautiful thought must needs embody itself in a beautiful form.

is this demand carried, that the poet is actually expected to have a vocabulary, not to say a dialect, of his own. Is this demand reasonable, and if so, within what limits ought it to be restricted? The advocates of *individuality* habitually use the word as if it and *personality* were interchangeable terms. This initial mistake—for a mistake it surely is—vitiates the whole of their criticism. The difference between individuality and personality is the difference between the surface self and the true self, between what a man seems to be and what he is in the depths of his buried life. It is possible for an inanimate thing to have an individuality of its own; but the term personality cannot be applied to anything below the level of Humanity. That God is personal is one of the cardinal articles of our faith; but the inner meaning of this doctrine discloses itself only to those who realize that it is the entire absence of individuality which differentiates the Divine personality from ours. Under the head of individuality we sum up all those peculiarities of physique, of intellect, of disposition, of character, which differentiate each man in turn from all his fellows. The personality of a man is constituted by three great attributes which differentiate him not from his kind but from the rest of Nature,—thought, will, love. In

fine, it is by means of his individuality that a man separates himself from his fellow men, whereas it is by means of his personality that he becomes one with them.

Now, if it be true that poetry is the interpretation and expression of man's deeper life, and that his deeper life is the seat of his personality, then it is certain that poetry, true poetry, is personal in the fullest sense of the word, and in the highest possible degree. But just because it is personal, and just so far as it is personal, it is free from the taint of individuality. For the deeper we go into the buried life, and the nearer we get to the springs of poetry, the nearer also do we get to those dormant passions and unformulated thoughts which seem to be potentially common to all men, and which constitute a secret bond of sympathy between man and man. And so it comes to pass that universality, not individuality, is of the essence of the poet's genius; that he belongs to mankind even more than to himself; that he is in secret sympathy with the hidden lives of his fellow men; and that his poetry, the voice of his personality, wakes a response in the hearts of others, not only in his own time, but also in far distant ages. The poet has ever, and rightly, been regarded as the mouthpiece of mighty and mysterious forces

which live and work beyond the horizon of his consciousness. To these he is accountable, not to his petty self. Poetry of the highest order will never be written by one whose individuality is aggressive, for the simple reason that the Muses can make no use of the man whose self-love is stronger than his devotion to their service. The attempt of individuality to divert into its own narrow conduit the stream of inspiration which is flowing through the channel of a great personality is as rash as it is impious, and is seldom permitted to succeed. Indeed, if the inspiration be genuine and the personality really great, the attempt cannot possibly succeed, or rather it cannot possibly be made. I do not say that the poet is to try to forget his surface self. Consciously to strive to liberate oneself from the "false control" of consciousness is to cast out devils in the name of Beelzebub. The whole-hearted servant of the Muses is well content to leave himself in their hands. Self-loss is of the essence of passion, and egotism is as antagonistic to enthusiasm as is centripetal to centrifugal force. The great actor cannot put his individuality into his acting, for he inevitably loses himself in his part. In like manner, when poetry is genuinely inspired, the personality of the poet spontaneously subdues and suppresses his in-

dividuality; and instead of trying to speak, as a lesser man might do, in his own puny person, he fulfils his high destiny by becoming "a docile echo of the eternal voice." On the other hand, when the individuality of the poet is prominent, his personality is necessarily kept in the background; and, however ingenious may be his workmanship, what he writes is not true poetry but uninspired and therefore perishable verse.

When theory conflicts with theory, it is well, if possible, to appeal to experience. Read the works of a really great poet—of a Sophocles, let us say, or a Shakspeare—and you will feel that you are in the presence of a grand personality, but that the individuality of the poet has been entirely effaced. The language of such a poet, the material that he uses, is clear in spite of its richness, simple in spite of its grandeur, and wholly free from eccentricity and affectation. In giving form to this material his personality expresses itself, a personality so strong and so vivid that it seems almost to absorb us into itself, and we doubt at last (so complete is the triumph of personality over individuality in us as well as in him) whether the voice that enthralls us comes from his heart or from ours. I shall be reminded by the student of literature that the individuality of the

writer asserts itself (to take notable examples) in the poetry of Browning and in the prose of Carlyle. Yes, it does; and just so far as it does, the work of these great writers falls short of supreme greatness. The individuality of Browning shows itself in his grotesqueness and obscurity. The individuality of Carlyle in his ruggedness, dogmatism and violence. Such qualities as these may interest a writer's contemporaries, for they gratify that desire for excitement and novelty which makes us find a fascination in sensational crimes and startling catastrophes; but even while they interest us, they repel us, and when, as taste changes, they cease to be interesting, they become wholly repellent, and the writings in which they are strongly marked begin to fall into disesteem. Nothing in literature is so perishable as eccentricity, with regard to which each generation has its own requirements and its own standard of taste; and the critic who urges contemporary poets to make their work as individual as possible is deliberately inviting them to build their structures on sand instead of rock.

The truth is that the modern craze for individuality is a grave symptom of a graver malady. The individualistic critic cares as little for the "roll of the ages" as for the chorus of sympathetic applause which some-

times rewards successful work during the lifetime of the worker. The poet, as he conceives of him, is not a seer charged with a spiritual message to the "general heart of man," but a clever craftsman, whose ingenuity is the delight of a select circle of fastidious connoisseurs. Viewed from this standpoint, individuality is of course the one thing needful in poetry; for the work that is highly charged with individuality is sure to abound in peculiarities of one sort or another—mannerisms of style, novelties of metre, eccentricities of diction, and the like; and each peculiarity in turn affords an agreeable change to men whose jaded palates are ever craving new sensations. The worst of this esoteric view of poetry is that it wholly subordinates matter to manner. The tendency of the literary *gourmet* is to become more and more indifferent to the burden of the poet's verse, to the thought that controls and the passion that inspires it, and to rate his work as good or bad according as its outward form pleases or displeases his own morbidly exacting taste. It is difficult to say whether this conception of the poet's meaning and function offers the deeper insult to poetry or to human nature. As well might it be said that Art exists in order to exercise the critical acumen of the bric-a-brac hunter, or that Religion exists in order to mini-

ster to the dialectical subtlety of the professional theologian.

Let us now test the worth of the individualistic doctrine by applying it to the practical problem of poetic diction. A strange theory has lately been started, or rather revived (for it is probably as old as the hills*) that the vocabulary of poetry must not only be gradually enlarged, but periodically renewed. That it should be gradually enlarged is no doubt desirable; in fact, such a process is always going on, though it is the outcome not of self-conscious versifiers working at the bidding of a clique of literary dilettantists, but of inspired poets working in blind obedience to their own trained tastes and intuitive judgments. But the advocates of euphuistic eccentricity in diction are not content that poetry should enlarge its vocabulary: they insist that the words and phrases which gain currency in poetry are apt to get worn out by much use, and therefore that the language of poetry needs perpetual renewal. For example: no colour-epithet in the English

* Euphuism was the expression of a kindred theory. When Armado, in "Love's Labour's Lost," speaks of the "*posteriors of the days*, which the rude multitude call the *afternoon*," and when Holofornes answers that "posterior of the day" is "liable, congruent, and measurable for the afternoon," these worthies are evidently doing their best to renew the worn-out and vulgarized vocabulary of their time.

language describes sunlight so well as *golden*, and therefore from time immemorial the word has been applied to the sun in its various phases, and to the things which the sun symbolizes,—the dawning splendour of hope and the noontide splendour of human excellence and glory. But the epithet, having by this time been worn threadbare, must no longer be used; and *amber*, *saffron*, and other equivalents for *yellow* (there is no equivalent for *golden*) are to take its place. One practical objection to this theory is that if it were acted upon, the English language would soon come to the end of its resources. It is not seriously suggested that the poet is to coin new words the meanings of which are known only to himself. He may indeed, if he have no sense of humour, build up strange compound words, such as *bone-wanly* or *weed-lithely*, or disinter obsolete words, such as *roynish* or *verayment*. But such attempts to enrich the language of poetry are sure to be ineffective; for it is only in despair of attracting attention by the artistic merits of their work that poets resort to these desperate devices; and verses which have nothing to commend them but occasional flashes of linguistic fatuity are doomed to early oblivion. The poet who has artistic gifts, and who, though influenced by the teaching of the New Criticism, retains some measure of sanity and some regard for

the canons of his craft, will content himself with taking current words that have not yet gained currency in poetry and introducing them into his verse. Or he will use epithets which, though permissible in poetry, are seldom met with, in place of those which have seen much service. But if he succeeds, if the new words really gain currency, if the rarer epithets displace the more familiar, how long will it be before they too are found wanting and thrown aside. If *saffron* and *amber* came into use as substitutes for *golden* (of course they are not substitutes for *golden*, for they do not suggest *splendour*), how long would it be before the ear of the fastidious critic, with its restless craving for change, grew weary of them also, and demanded that they should be pensioned off? *Saffron* and *amber* might last for a few years, if used sparingly; but there are other words, the very words which the individualist rates most highly, which become superannuated before they have begun to win acceptance. For the more striking a word is on account of its piquancy or poignancy, the more difficult it is for the feat of introducing it into poetry to be repeated. *Incarnadine* has been used once and for all time, and no one could use it now without feeling that he was guilty of something akin to plagiarism; and though Keats managed to find a place for the

ugly heraldic term *gules* in an otherwise beautiful stanza, the word will never be admitted into the vocabulary of poetry, and it will seldom if ever be used again. As for such words as *bone-wanly* or *roynish*, their inventors (or discoverers) have proprietary rights in them which ought to be, and no doubt will always be, respected.

The theory which I am considering, though significant as a symptom, for it shows that the dilettantist demand for individuality in art tends at last towards sheer individualism and therefore towards anarchy and chaos, does not deserve serious criticism for its own sake. The logic of experience has ever refuted, and will ever refute it. It is against *stop-gap*, not against *well-worn*, epithets that the critic has a right to protest. The use of the latter is permissible so long and so far as they are *really* needed. Such an epithet as *golden* is as immortal as the names which it qualifies and as the things which these names denote.

In point of fact the language of poetry, far from being charged with the individuality of the poet, is the part of his work in which even his personality expresses itself least. If we may regard language as the material in which and with which he works, then we may surely say that his vocabulary no more expresses his per-

sonality than an unwrought block of marble expresses the personality of its future sculptor. It is in his sculpture, in the form that he gives to his marble, that the personality of the sculptor reveals itself; and in like manner it is in his poetry, in the form that he gives to his language, that the personality of the poet makes itself felt. But just as the sculptor prefers marble for his work to granite or chalk, and selects his marble with the utmost care, so does the poet (though the selection is made for him rather than by him) choose some words and some classes of words as suitable for his purpose, and reject others. It is no doubt due to the half-unconscious operation of a selective faculty which is a vital part of poetic genius, that the vocabulary of lyrical poetry has a very narrow range, whereas that of epic and of dramatic poetry is by comparison varied and comprehensive, while in the lighter and less poetical forms of verse the poet is almost entirely unrestricted in his choice of words. And just as in art the selection and preliminary arrangement of the materials should show that the artist was in sympathy with his subject, and had some insight into its essential nature, so in poetry the style of the poet's diction should adapt itself in some measure to the character of the feeling which he wishes to express. Thus an

elaborate and ornate diction is more in keeping with the subsidiary than with the central movements of thought and feeling; whereas when very strong personal emotion is seeking utterance, sincerity on the part of the poet becomes a matter of sovereign importance, and a transparent medium of expression—in other words, a clear and simple diction—is imperatively demanded. Nay, there are thoughts and feelings to which recondite images and far-fetched epithets are as inappropriate as a scarlet robe to a vestal virgin.

The individualist thinks that, as regards language, each poet should be a law unto himself; but the history of literature lends no countenance to his theory. The student of poetry will not fail to observe that there are certain marks, certain characteristic features, by which poetic may be distinguished from non-poetic diction. To begin with, the words that the poet uses are such as to command feeling. Thus on the one hand he instinctively avoids the use of scientific terms, of words that are in any degree abstruse, specific, technical. He may be unable to account for his repugnance to such terms, but he knows that if he were to use one, it would jar on his ear like a false note in music, and he rightly argues from this that there is no place for it in his verse. One ob-

vious reason why such words are to be avoided is that they do not appeal to our emotions. In the first place, they are quite unintelligible to ordinary persons. In the second place, our apprehension of them, if we do apprehend them at all, is purely intellectual. On the other hand, the poet instinctively avoids all words that are irredeemably commonplace. For such words, being exclusively connected with the common everyday experiences of the lower and more material side of our lives, become at last inseparably associated with what I may call vulgar feeling,—feeling with which, since it is wholly unemotional, poetry has no concern.

Here then are two extremes which poetry instinctively avoids,—the extreme of technicality on the one hand and of vulgarity on the other. There are, however, two opposite errors into which, in his anxiety to avoid these objectionable extremes, he may possibly fall. He may confound what is vulgar with what is simple, a fatal confusion which is apt to generate a pedantic diction and an inflated style. As a matter of fact, simplicity, whether in feeling or language, is diametrically opposed to vulgarity, the former being as large and comprehensive as the latter is narrow and definite. Or he may imagine that because technical terms, which are generally polysyllabic, are to be

avoided, therefore all polysyllabic words are out of place. But here again the difference between what is poetical and what is non-poetical in diction is the difference between what is vague and what is precise. It is not the length of a technical term that disqualifies it for use in poetry, but its extreme accuracy and definiteness. *Immemorial* is a long word, but it is as poetical as *antisepalous* is the reverse, for it has the two-fold charm of vastness and vagueness, whereas *antisepalous* is rigidly precise. The truth is that poetry, which is the expression of large, obscure, and indefinable feelings, find its appropriate material in *vague* words—words of large import and with many meanings and shades of meaning. Here we have an almost unfailing test for determining the poetic fitness of words, a test which every true poet unconsciously, but withal unerringly, applies. Precision, whether in the direction of what is commonplace or of what is technical, is always unpoetical. To introduce such commonplace words as *waistcoat* or *mustard-pot* into a poem would be scarcely less difficult than to introduce such scientific terms as *coleoptera* or *foraminiferous;* and the obstacle in each case would be the definiteness of the term employed. Even the narrower, and, as it seems, more definite terms of poetry are vague. They express

flashes of light rather than constituent rays, aspects rather than properties or relations. Or, if they do stand for properties, then it is for such as are large and in a sense obvious, not minute and recondite; for those properties which are rich in association, which give a thing its beauty and eloquence, which find it a place in the living whole of an idealized picture, not for those which are rich only in scientific meaning, which give a thing its exact place in the material economy of Nature, and which enable us to label and ticket it, and assign it its own particular cupboard, shelf and pigeon-hole in the museum of the savant and specialist. Vagueness in the word, with the corresponding vagueness in the thing, gives free scope to that play of the imagination through which emotion is kindled, or rather which is itself but one aspect of the kindling of emotion,—gives it free scope, and in so doing stimulates and quickens it. For the imagination is a natural faculty, sure to energize if it have but free access to a wide and open field of action. And so to allow it to play is in a manner to excite it to play. When Keats tells us of

> "magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn";

when Wordsworth's Highland Reaper sings of

" old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago ";

when Virgil condenses all the pathos of life into one immortal line,

" Sunt lacrymae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt " ;

we feel the infinite power and charm of vagueness. An almost boundless prospect opens out before the imagination, and the emotions are proportionately exalted and quickened. Precision, on the other hand, since it leaves nothing to the imagination, tends to starve and stifle our emotions, taking away from them not merely the distant prospects that delight them, but even the atmosphere that they breathe.

Vague words, then, stir emotion; exact terms repress it. The former are as congenial to poetry as the latter are repugnant. Here is one more proof that the main function of the poet is to make our deeper feelings awake from sleep.

As are words in their isolation, so will they be when combined. Poetry in its phrases as in its words avoids precision. Pedantry and vulgarity are alike offensive to it. It is needless for me to support this proposition with argument or illustration. Its correctness will

scarcely be denied, and the inference to be drawn from it is the same as that which has just been stated.

So far we have been considering the outward form of poetic expression. And now as to the expression itself. What are its leading features?

All poetry is, in a sense, descriptive. Μίμησις, imitation, to use Aristotle's favourite word, is of the essence not of tragedy only but of almost every kind of poetry. The poet describes things as they appear to him, that is to say, as transformed and in a manner created anew by the feelings which they awake in him. How and on what principles does he set to work at this task?

In defining what I conceive to be the poet's task, I have perhaps unwittingly answered this question. We have seen that the sound of the poet's verse, the words that he uses, the flow of his language, have all one thing in common: they awake emotional feeling. It is the same, I must believe, with his general manner of describing things, though here of course the awakened feeling begins to be directed into a definite channel. *He must quicken our emotions by faithfully rendering his own.* When I speak of the manner of describing, I refer mainly to the details and incidents into which

any scene, whether of external nature or of human life, can be analysed. The poet wishes to describe something which has impressed him —a sunset, let us say, or a spring morning, a battle-field or a love-story. Which of the constituent phenomena, which of the details is he to select, and on what principle is he to group them? Which are to be prominent and which subordinate? I answer briefly, he must select those which command emotion, which impress us, and he must group them according to their power of impressing us. Those which impress us most should be prominent and central. Those which impress us least should be kept in the background.

This answer will not be received without a protest. Exception will certainly be taken to it so far as it applies to the description of what we call scenery. I hold that the business of the poet, when describing outward nature, is to render his own feelings, and so awaken ours. He must paint things as they reveal themselves to him. If, for example, a fleet of approaching ships seems to him, at a moment when its appearance is singularly impressive, to "hang in the clouds," he must say that it "hangs in the clouds." He knows well enough that ships do—not and cannot "hang in the clouds," but if he is to be faith-

ful to his artistic feeling, he must say that they do. The critic of the "realistic" school will contend, in opposition to this theory, that the poet must paint things, not as they seem to be, but as they actually are; that he must be faithful, not to his own emotions, but to the scene that he describes.

Here the eternal controversy between realism (falsely so called) and idealism breaks out anew. I have already had occasion to dissent from the "realist" on general grounds. I will now endeavour to show, by reference to this concrete problem, that, apart from its theoretical merits or demerits, his conception of art works badly, breaks down in practice. In self-defence I must do this, for his conception of art in general and of poetry in particular is at open war with mine.

The pseudo-realistic school had its origin in a just protest against the artificiality of the last century. In the days of rhyming heroics, Nature was described by the use of rhetorical phrases, which apparently served no higher purpose than that of making the couplets to which they belonged run smoothly and balance well. Language of this sort has, of course, no counterpart in personal emotion, and it is, as often as not, inaccurate in its material details. In other words, it is false both to the ideal and

to the actual, both to feeling and to fact. When it begins to be criticized, its inaccuracy, its disloyalty to material fact, is the first thing that strikes the critic; and he not unnaturally assumes that the remedy for artificiality with all its attendant evils, is close observation of the thing described. And so a new school of poetry arises. Its professors say, "Observe things carefully; study them in and for themselves; notice all their details; and then embody the results of your labour in your verse." In these scientific days this advice falls on willing ears; and at last one has the strange spectacle of poets going out, note-book in hand one might almost say, to observe deliberately and with clear consciousness what lies around them, and to write poetry in the strength of their observations.

But one cannot help asking these poets whether their object is to reproduce every detail in Nature, however minute or recondite. To describe a scene as it is in all its material detail is the work, not of poetry but of science, or rather of all the sciences, and of all the sciences working for ever. If that be a task beyond the power and outside the scope of poetry, then one must ask, what details are to be selected to the exclusion of all others? Till this question has been

answered, the whole difficulty remains unsolved. Description, as poetry or even as literature conceives of it, may be defined as the art of omitting; and it is an art which taxes our powers to the utmost. Anyone can go out into the fields and amass details. Few, very few, can select and omit. "How a man of some wide thing that he has witnessed will construct a narrative, what kind of picture and delineation he will give of it, is the best measure you could get of what intellect is in the man. Which circumstance is vital, and shall stand prominent, which unessential, fit to be suppressed; where is the true beginning, the true sequence and ending? To find out this, you tax the whole force of insight that is in the man. He must understand the thing; according to the depth of his understanding will the fitness of his answer be." So says Carlyle; and if he is right, the pseudo-realist is wrong. The work of the poet is to select details and combine them into a picture. He must select those which are really essential to the picture. He must know the ideal worth of each as it comes under his hand. Now this knowledge cannot be given by observation. It is instinctive and works intuitively. It belongs to the incommunicable part of one, to one's genius. Realists

of the modern school lose sight of this altogether. They seem to think that one detail is as good as another, so long as it is accurate, true to fact. Hence they would substitute closeness of observation for genius, and scientific study for emotional insight. But they forget that, putting genius and insight out of the question, memory, a faculty which is common to all of us, omits far more than it retains, that it refuses to overburden itself with details, that its normal tendency is to sift things, to keep what is best worth keeping and keep most carefully what has impressed itself with most force and vividness. And so, when they counsel us to supplement memory with a note-book, they seem to urge us to do exactly what Nature intended us not to do.

But Nature avenges herself on those who disobey her. It is impossible to bring into a description all the details of a scene. Selection of some kind or other there must be. If we will not select in the way that Nature points out to us, we must select in some false and unnatural way. Hence it is that modern poets who begin by telling us that all details are equally valuable, end by preferring those which are minute and recondite, and which therefore have least charm for us, least power over the emotions, least "ideal worth." The student's

note-book cannot be placed on a level with the poet's insight. One of the two must yield to the other. If we will not make the note-book and its contents subordinate, we have no choice but to make them supreme.*

It is nothing to the purpose to say that specialists observe and perhaps dwell with delight on phenomena which other men fail to notice. Poetry should appeal to mankind at large, not to the specialist. It is dangerous to go far into detail, for this if for no other reason, that one is apt to mistake individual for universal experiences, even if one does not go so far as to hold that the business of the poet is to study and record those very phenomena which escape the ordinary untrained observation. "The business of a poet," says Imlac in Rasselas, "is to examine not the individual but the

* Even Tennyson, great and true poet though he was, trusted too much to his note-book. When Mr. Holbrook, in "Cranford," praises that overrated line

"More black than ash-buds in the front of March,"

because it added to his knowledge of Nature, he really pronounces its condemnation. The dull, lack-lustre black of the ash-bud has failed to attract general attention, for the very good reason that it happens to be entirely unattractive. So far is it from suggesting the glossy darkness of a woman's hair, that nothing but the poet's desire to pose as an observant naturalist can account for its introduction into his verse. The line ought to communicate to us the poet's imaginative delight in his heroine's beauty. In point of fact, it communicates nothing but a somewhat uninteresting piece of information.

species; to remark general and large experiences. . . . He is to exhibit in his portraits of Nature such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations—which one may have remarked and another rejected—for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness." The word "carelessness" is perhaps too strong. I do not for a moment say that a poet should be deliberately careless of fact. No one can set a higher value than I do on truthfulness in description. I differ from the pseudo-realist only in holding that description should as a rule be so simple as to exclude all possibility of error. Nor do I wish to say a word against habits of attention and observation.* Let the poet cultivate such habits if he will; not that there will be much need for him to do so, for his sympathy with outward Nature, combined with his artistic love of the beautiful, will *compel* him to notice many things to which other eyes are indifferent if not actually

* The function of the poet, as a "seer," is to discover the ideal, that is, the real, in the actual; the function of the poet, as a "maker," is, by idealizing the actual, to transform it into the real. So long as he remains faithful to this conception of his duty, there is no reason why he should not, by observation and study, continuously enlarge his sphere of the actual. But he must ever bear in mind that cataloguing the actual is a very different thing from representing the real, and that, for the purposes of poetry, one line of the latter is worth a thousand pages of the former.

blind.* Only in his seasons of inspiration let him observe unconsciously and without reflecting on what he does. If we turn back upon our emotions and attempt to analyse them, they will vanish under our hands. Apart from this, one who observes consciously will infallibly notice what is minute and curious rather than what is broad and striking. What is worth reproducing forces itself upon us, or at any rate upon those among us who are gifted with poetic feeling and insight: we cannot help observing it. What does not impress itself upon the heart has no place in poetry. It is waste labour to turn aside and search for it. The function of the poet is, by force of high instinct, to analyse an ideal whole into its essential elements, essential that is on the side of ideality and beauty, not to note and record

* When a poet depicts a phenomenon which his love of the beautiful has *compelled* him to observe, the chances are that other persons have seen and even admired the same phenomenon, yet without consciously noticing it. For example, when we read Tennyson's beautiful couplet

> "The ragged rims of thunder brooding low,
> With shadow-streaks of rain,"

we at once remember that the thunder cloud sometimes has "ragged rims," and that distant rain sometimes presents the appearance of "shadow-streaks." Perhaps we had never consciously noticed either phenomenon; but when the poet sets them before us in his verse, we realize that they are in a manner familiar to us, and that somehow or other—we cannot say when or where—our hearts have held intercourse with their beauty.

physical facts. If I am wrong, then let botanists be the poets of flowers, geologists of mountains, astronomers of the stars.

This straining after fidelity to the minuter details of Nature is as superfluous, even from its own point of view, as it is inartistic. From every point of view, and not least from that of accuracy, the broad strokes will be found to answer best. In the first place, they move us most. They keep entirely within the lines of our normal experience, and therefore have a wealth of suggestiveness which is wanting in the more refined touches. The very words that correspond to them, the names that stand for large and simple phenomena, make their way at once to our hearts. The narrower, subtler words need to be interpreted by the general sense and rhythm of the passage. These do not. Each of them has its own message.

> "The silence that is in the starry sky,
> The sleep that is among the lonely hills."

What simple, every-day words are these—*silence*, *starry*, *sky*, *sleep*, *lonely*, *hills!* But how deeply, how vividly, how directly they move us! More than that. The broader strokes carry with them, by the power of association, the more delicate touches, each in its own place and with its proper force and meaning; and in

this way they so describe things as to combine the maximum of accuracy with the maximum of impressiveness. They quicken the imagination by leaving much for it to do. They re-kindle the emotions of the lover of Nature. His feelings, such is the power of a few simple words, feelings which a thousand scenes of beauty have stirred and deepened, resume their play; and out of those remembered scenes such features arise before him as are needed to form the poet's picture, the picture which the poet has felt and would have others feel. Without an effort on his part these features glide together harmoniously into one perfect whole. This unconscious part of him—feeling, imagination, call it what you will—first set in motion and then guided by the words of the poet, fashions itself for itself a far more perfect picture than the subtlest skill of the most accomplished word-painter could ever place before it.* By a true

* I have recently read an able and interesting novel called "Children of the Mist." The scene of the story is laid in Dartmoor, and the writer evidently knows and loves the country which he describes. The book contains several passages of quasi-poetical word-painting. Here is one of them.

"Above Teign's shrunken current extended oak and ash, while her banks bore splendid concourse of the wild water-loving dwellers in that happy valley. Meadowsweet nodded creamy crests; hemlock and fool's parsley and seeding willow-herb crowded together beneath far-scattered filigree of honeysuckles and brambles with berries, some ripe, some red; while the scarlet cords of briar and white bryony gemmed every

instinct the great masters have felt that their work was to call feeling into play, and just to indicate the directions, the main channels, in which it was to flow, and then leave the rest to the feeling's own inherent powers working in obedience to its own natural laws. The picture that is so placed before us is true at once to the poet's feelings and to our own. The leading features are such as he has felt and indicated, but in calling up minuter and less essential points they work in each of us according to the laws of the individual's being. The poet brings us to his point of view, but it is we,

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riotous trailing thicket, dene and dingle along the river's brink; and in the grassy spaces between rose little chrysoprase steeples of woodsage all set in shining fern. Upon the boulders in mid-stream subaqueous mosses, now revealed and starved by the drought, died hard, and the seeds of grasses, fig-worts and persicarias thrust up flower and foliage, flourishing in unwonted spots from which the next freshet would rudely tear them. Insect life did not abundantly manifest itself, for the day was sunless; but now and again, with crisp rattle of his gauzy wings, a dragon-fly flashed along the river. Through these scenes the Teign rolled drowsily and with feeble pulses. Upon one bank rose the confines of Whiddon; on the other, abrupt and interspersed with gulleys of shattered shale, ascended huge slopes whereon a whole summer of sunshine had scorched the heather to dry death. But fading purple still gleamed here and there in points and splashes, and the lesser fungi mingling therewith, scattered gold upon the tremendous acclivities even to the crown of the trees that towered remote and very blue upon the uplifted sky-line. Swallows, with white breasts flashing, circled over the river, and while their elevation above the water appeared at times tremendous, the abrupt steepness of the

such as we are, who see. We see with his eyes and yet with our own. The picture, while centrally true to his experience and his conception, is yet in detail adapted, or rather adapts itself, to the feelings of each of his readers. Thus nothing is lost. When the poet himself goes into details, some of his minor touches may lie outside the range of our observation, and so fail to "find us." But here neither feeling is sacrificed to accuracy, nor accuracy to feeling.

It would seem, then, that the highest order of descriptive poetry is that which aims first

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gorge was such that the birds almost brushed the hillside with their wings."

An admirable passage this, full of strong and subtle sympathy with "Nature," felicitously worded and (I doubt not) unimpeachably accurate! And yet, as compared with a few lines of genuine poetry, how utterly ineffective! The strain on the attention is so great, that emotional response on the part of the reader is impossible; each detail in turn cancels the effect produced by its predecessor; and when one has come to the end of the passage, the general impression left upon the mind is that one has been unable to "see the wood for the trees." Read the passage with the care which it deserves: then read these lines,

> "He hearkens not! light comer, he is flown!
> What matters it? next year he will return,
> And we shall have him in the sweet spring-days,
> With whitening hedges, and uncrumpling fern,
> And blue-bells trembling by the forest ways,
> And scent of hay new-mown,"

and you will realize how impassable is the gulf which separates fidelity to poetic feeling from fidelity to material fact.

and foremost at fidelity to feeling, and makes fidelity to fact of secondary and derivative importance. And so we are once more led to conclude that the function of the poet is to feel strongly and deeply, to tell us what he feels, and to make us feel it.

I have gone at some length into the question of word-painting because I wished to show that my conception of the place and purpose of the poet holds good even in that province of poetry, the description of outward Nature, in which at first sight it might seem to break down, and in which at the present day it sometimes finds itself at variance both with the doctrine of critics and with the practice of poets. It will be a comparatively easy task to show that the conception holds good when poetry comes to deal with the phenomena of human life. I need not take pains to prove that the intimate knowledge of human nature which is indispensable to the dramatist, springs from sympathy at once wide and deep, and that the one unfailing source of such sympathy is a strong and subtle play of feeling. As the Drama is in its origin, so it is in its effect. It is not the function of the dramatist to paint the phenomena of human life precisely as they are, to represent all the details of our existence, high and low, noble

and sordid, spiritual and material, vital and unessential, one with another. The poet of outward nature would as little think of being minutely faithful to every blade and leaf, to every tint and shade. Both poets must be faithful to Nature; but in neither case does fidelity to Nature mean servile accuracy or imply scientific analysis. It is fidelity to what I may call the ideal nature of things. Just as the poet who has a real insight into outward Nature combines into a whole such physical phenomena as command our deeper feelings, and gives them prominence in proportion to their ideal worth, so does the great dramatist bring together into one picture such manifestations of human nature as will affect us most, making prominent those that are of larger import, and keeping in the background those whose influence is weaker and less direct. In other words, his object is to appeal to our hearts, to move us, to melt us; and his ulterior object is to make us see things, through the medium of kindled emotion, as he sees them; in other words, to *idealize* them, to see them as they really are. We know, each for himself, what effect moments of great and unselfish sorrow, or great and unselfish joy, have upon us. They seem, as it were, to lift a veil from our eyes; to show, as by a lightning flash, things that were

hidden from us; to explain, if only for an instant, things that bewildered us. They solve a riddle. They whisper a secret. They reconcile us to destiny. They put us in harmony with the laws under which we live. They give to each phenomenon and circumstance of life its true value, dwarfing such as are unduly prominent, exalting and transfiguring such as are undeservedly lost to sight. In fine, they give us a new view of life—a higher view, can it be doubted?—an ideal view, if I may be allowed to call it so. Such moments are rare and fleeting. In actual life the ideal element is hidden beneath a superincumbent mass of clogging details, which fill up our lives from moment to moment, and occupy our minds from day to day. If these are ever to be rolled away, even for an instant, it can only be by a flash of intense emotion. In the drama, on the other hand, as in the poetry of outward nature, details are cleared away, and the ideal element is allowed to stand forth unembarrassed and unobscured, the consequence being that our feelings, loosed for a while from the "hourly false control," are free to respond to every influence that impresses them. Then again in the drama, the play of forces, which in actual life need months and years for their development, is brought within the compass of a few pages, and

therefore, as we read or listen, of a few hours or even minutes; and its effect upon us, being thus concentrated, is proportionately intensified. It is to these facts that the drama owes its right to exist. The drama of actual life is not enough for us. We must supplement it with and interpret it through the creations of poetry.

The moments that liberate us from our lower selves are rare and fleeting; but anyone who has ever lived through one of them will understand what I mean when I speak of an ideal view of things. To such a view the great poet is proner than most of us; to some extent it colours the whole of his life. And the imperishable worth of his poems lies in this, that we who listen to him are able, however faintly, to idealize life, to see it through that mist of sunlit tears which in actual life so seldom rises, so seldom and too often at so bitter a cost.

I have been trying to prove that in poetry feeling finds its own voice, and in doing so wakens responsive feeling in other hearts. In my former chapter I sought to show that the poet's feeling is true in virtue of its intensity, that the strength of his emotion is measured by the clearness of his insight. These two characteristics of poetry must now be brought together. Poetry is the true expression of true

feeling; in other words, it is the very voice of truth—not of truth as science understands the word, truth about phenomena, but of ideal truth, truth which has reality for its counterpart. The poet differs from the rest of us in having a clearer insight into the hidden heart of Nature. If we are ever to be initiated into Nature's deeper mysteries, it must be through him. His poetry is the channel through which his heart opens and maintains intercourse with ours,—the medium through which he makes us feel what he has felt and see what he has seen. What he does for us is to touch our hearts, and so lift a veil from our eyes. Whenever, therefore, we find ourselves deeply moved by poetry, we may feel sure that we are coming in contact with hidden truth. Nature reveals her most sacred truths only to the poet and will not suffer her oracles to be spoken in any language but his. I distrust one who pretends to tell me of the inmost secrets of Nature, and yet does not "utter them in song." He who really reaches the heart of things has no choice but to be a poet.* The central realities of the

* Not necessarily a *word-poet*. Language is not the only medium of poetic expression. There are *sound-poets*, *colour-poets*, and *form-poets*, as well as poets proper or word-poets. Poetry proper is of course the theme of this essay; and, though much of what I said about poetic feeling is applicable to "art" as well as to "poetry," I was careful to begin my study of poetic

universe are so great, that if we are to apprehend or even approach them, we can do so only through the medium of profound emotion. If they impress us at all, they must impress us deeply; and the feelings which are so awakened can have no outlet but that of poetry. We have a right to demand music and melody of some sort or other from one who has felt the music and melody which are at the centre of things, and which he must have found there if he ever really reached it. "A musical thought," says Carlyle, "is one spoken by a man that has penetrated into the inmost heart of the thing; detected the inmost mystery of it, namely, the melody that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul, whereby it exists and has a right to be here in the world. All inward things, we may say, are melodious; naturally utter themselves in song. See deep enough, and you see music everywhere; the heart of nature being everywhere music if you can only reach it."

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expression with the assumption that the poet's normal medium of expression is *language*. What I am now trying to say is that, *if the inner truth of things is to express itself in human speech*, it must come to us as poetry and in no other form.

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